

## TROUBLING CONJUGAL LOYALTIES: THE FIRST INDIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH AND THE TRANSIMPERIAL FRAMEWORK OF SENSATION

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*By Sukanya Banerjee*

BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE (1838–94) is widely recognized as one of the preeminent novelists of nineteenth-century India. A literary forerunner of the much-celebrated Rabindranath Tagore, he authored fourteen Bengali novels which set the benchmark for Bengal's foray into novelistic territory. Bankim acquired national and international repute over the course of his lifetime, and not only were his novels translated into other Indian languages over the course of the nineteenth century, but translations of his work also appeared in Russia from as early as the 1870s (Novikova ii).<sup>1</sup> While Bankim's fame rests on the strength of his Bengali writings multiply translated as they were, his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), was written in English. Interestingly, *Rajmohan's Wife*, usually considered the first Indian novel in English, is now seldom read, a neglect replicating the scant attention that the novel garnered when it was first serialized in the 1860s.

*Rajmohan's Wife* was written in installments when Bankim, a colonial bureaucrat and amongst the first graduates of the newly established Calcutta University (he graduated from Presidency College in 1858), was posted in Khulna in the early 1860s as deputy magistrate. The novel was serialized in 1864 in the English-language weekly, *Indian Field*, edited by Kishori Chand Mitra, former member of the Bengal Civil Service. While the bureaucratic consanguinity between Bankim and his editor bespeaks the belletristic aspect of bureaucracy, a compelling point that deserves more attention especially in the context of nineteenth-century India, it perhaps also explains Bankim's reason for writing his first novel in English.

In a paper presented before the Bengal Social Science Association in 1870, when he had already secured his standing as a successful Bengali author, Bankim bemoaned what he perceived to be the inferior quality of Bengali literary production, especially in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. According to him, Bengali literary standards had been adversely affected by the "disinclination of the more educated classes to write for their own country in their own language." As he added somewhat reproachfully, "It is degrading for the dashing young Bengali who writes and talks English like an Englishman to be caught writing a Bengali book" ("A Popular Literature for Bengal" 3: 100). At one level, Bankim's

assessment of Bengali literary standards reflected the disdain that the emergent class of the Bengali *bhadralok* (“gentleman”) held towards vibrant, popular forms of Bengali literature that were prolific, particularly in satirizing the anglicized Bengali. At another level, Bankim’s limited perspective failed to discern notable developments in Bengali literature in the first half of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, even as he dismissed much of the literary production from that period as “literary filth” (“Bengali Literature” 3: 105), his own writing owed a debt to the corpus that he so easily brushed aside.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he went as far as to state: “It is a fact that the best Bengali books are the productions of Bengalis who are highly cultivated English scholars” (“A Popular Literature for Bengal” 3: 100). Even as such a statement hints at a Macaulayean anglophilia, it is worth nuancing its difference. Bankim uttered this sentiment in the context of shoring up a robust Bengali literary tradition, and if he found such a tradition currently lacking, it was not on account of the inferior examples provided by Sanskrit or Arabic literature. Rather, Bankim’s despair at the state of Bengali literature was occasioned by his view that contemporary writers were under the thrall of a rich Sanskritist legacy, so much so that they had jealously guarded against any mark of “foreign origin, however expressive or necessary it may be” (“Bengali Literature” 3: 108). Impatient with the stifling effects of an overbearing classical legacy, particularly in terms of literary technique and style, Bankim invoked English as a welcome change to bolster vernacular literary traditions. Ironically, in so doing, he accorded a classical status to English, as indeed had Macaulay. Even as such a maneuver seemed to bypass the casteist hegemony of Sanskrit learning, it connoted a bilingual felicity that was irreducibly inflected by class. If the “best Bengali books” could be written only by “highly educated English scholars,” then Bankim was obviously entrusting the task of reinvigorating a Bengali literary tradition to a self-selecting group of *bhadralok* writers who could have access to such an education. And if his own class and educational standing spurred him to contribute to this path-clearing effort by writing in Bengali, that could perhaps equally explain his earlier decision to write his first novel in English.

If Bankim’s acute awareness of his class status and educational standing had anything to do with his decision to write *Rajmohan’s Wife* in English, it did not do much, however, for the novel’s literary fate. Little evidence remains of how the novel was critically received, and, in light of the limited circulation of *Indian Field*, it may very well have been the case that not many read the installments when they were published.<sup>3</sup> In her comments on the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee even asks if Bankim “himself [was] affected by the awareness of a lack of a sizeable reading community, a suspicion that gets confirmed by the author’s declining involvement in the events of the novel in the later chapters” (Afterword 139). The conclusion of *Rajmohan’s Wife* does seem summarily abrupt, and it is possible that Bankim was more interested in *Durgesh Nandini*, his first Bengali novel, which he began conceptualizing (for an existing Bengali reading public) while writing *Rajmohan’s Wife*. In fact, the resounding critical and commercial success of *Durgesh Nandini* (1864), and of his Bengali novels thereafter, relegated *Rajmohan’s Wife* to obscurity, so much so that the state-sponsored collection of essays published to mark the centennial anniversary of Bankim’s death bears almost no reference to it.<sup>4</sup> More often than not, scholars refer to *Durgesh Nandini* as Bankim’s first novel.

This essay draws attention to *Rajmohan’s Wife* in an attempt to reclaim it within the repertoire of nineteenth-century Indian literature, and it also locates the novel amidst a lateral density of literary concerns and cultural influences. In terms of Bankim’s own work,

a focus on *Rajmohan's Wife* gains significance in light of the fact that his legacy is perhaps overshadowed by his novel *Anandamath* (1882), which, with its brand of self-renunciatory nationalism, served to buttress a militantly nationalist anticolonial agitation in the early twentieth century. More often than not, Bankim's literary legacy is now read through the lens of the nation. In taking up *Rajmohan's Wife*, a novel that centers on questions of conjugal fidelity, my interest lies instead in probing the novel's treatment of conjugality. This is not to say that questions of conjugality are delinked from that of the nation. Rather, it is to route conjugality differently by locating it within a wider framework that enables one to analyze not only how changing relations of conjugality across the imperial framework – and particularly across the colonial divide – impinged upon national imaginaries but also the kinds of narratives that multivalent articulations of conjugality made possible. How does the discourse of conjugality act as a heuristic for tracking the nineteenth-century embrace of the bourgeois modern? To what extent was a transimperial framework – one involving nineteenth-century England and India – crucial to this embrace, and how is the logic of conjugal loyalty engendered by this framework also crucial in sustaining it?

That Bankim chose to write *Rajmohan's Wife* in novel form for *Indian Field* (he had earlier written in verse while in college) reflects the enthusiasm generated by the English novel amongst Western-educated Indians. On the other hand, it also directs attention to the changing trends in contemporary Bengali literature, which by the 1860s had moved away from the almost exclusive sway of verse and drama to include a discernible and growing corpus of prose narratives (Harder 360). While such a shift no doubt bore the imprint of the English novel, it also reflected the extent to which composite “indigenous” literary forms such as the *naksha* had facilitated the narrativization of a changing urban and social order in the first few decades of the century.<sup>5</sup> *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (The Pampered Son of a Rich Family), written in 1855–1857 by Peary Chand Mitra – brother of Kishori Chand, editor of *Indian Field* – is considered a descendant of the *naksha* and is often designated as the first Bengali novel (Harder 388).<sup>6</sup> As a review of *Alaler Gharer Dulal* in the *Hindoo Patriot* (8 April 1858) noted: “This is a valuable book. Valuable as it is the first work of the kind. . . . Valuable, as it presents in varied and well arranged group a graphic and full picture of Hindu society” (qtd. in Ghose 290). Dealing with the misadventures of the wayward son of a nouveau riche Bengali family, *Alaler Gharer Dulal* provides glimpses of Bengali society grappling with urbanization, anglicization, and the development of capitalist modernity. Of course, Bengali prose narratives such as Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay's *Nababubibilas* (1825) and *Nababibibilas* (1831) had already, in earlier nudges towards realism, provided such glimpses. What aided the novelization of *Alaler Gharer Dulal* was perhaps the narrative arc provided by a thematic preoccupation with character and self-development. As Mitra, writing under the pseudonym of Tekchand Thakur, states in the preface:

[This] original novel in Bengali being the first work of its kind . . . chiefly treats of the pernicious effects of allowing children to be improperly brought up, with remarks on the existing system of education, on self-formation and . . . culture. (n. pag)

Given the structural and thematic predilections of *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, it is evident that even as Bankim broke new ground by writing a novel in English, his endeavor as a novelist was not without precedent. But if the preface to *Alaler Gharer Dulal* resonates as “Victorian” in its interest in questions of individual self-improvement and character

formation, then Bankim's sustained engagement with the question of conjugality and domesticity in *Rajmohan's Wife* further underlines a Victorianism with an immediacy and engagement that cannot be explained along the register of colonial mimicry alone. Rather, by prompting a productive introspection of the geospatial contours of the term "Victorian," *Rajmohan's Wife* reassembles it as a meeting ground – a confluence, rather – that channels diverse, overlapping, and necessarily polyglot responses to a nineteenth century bourgeois modernity that simultaneously implicated, if in differential terms, both colonizer and colonized.<sup>7</sup> Stretching the fabric of what is taken to constitute a Victorian sensibility beyond the conventional frames of geospatial reference is not to render "Victorian" a salutary badge of inclusion.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is to animate the recognizable characteristics that the term denotes by highlighting the multiple collusions, contests, and exchanges through which received notions of the Victorian are forged. More important, a laterally inclined sense of the Victorian, apart from delinking it from the circumscription of national-racial boundary lines (boundaries that arguably were consolidated over the course of the nineteenth century), helps us better to understand the structures of power and institutional authority as they insinuated themselves through those linked categories – in this case, India and England – that more insular notions of the Victorian tend to keep apart. Nowhere is this insinuation more evident than in the debates and narrativization of the question of conjugality that constellated related concerns of class, gender, and patriarchy as they emerged in both England and India in the 1860s.

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IT IS PERHAPS NOT A COINCIDENCE that *Rajmohan's Wife*, which centers on the possible marital transgression of its eponymous protagonist amidst a background of theft, kidnapping, and legal intrigue, was written and published at a time when a spate of novels dealing with similar themes – bigamy, adultery, murder, and blackmail – were holding the British audience captive.<sup>9</sup> Popularly, and often pejoratively, termed "sensation novels," they combined, as we know, elements of melodrama, the Gothic, crime reportage, and domestic realism and were so called not only because they dealt with sensational or scandalous themes, but also because they were perceived to appeal more to the senses than to "higher" faculties of the mind. Often accused of focusing more on plot rather than character, sensation novels offended the reigning literary sensibilities of the day. But even as they were dismissed by the literary establishment, their immense popularity could perhaps be attributed to the fact that sensation novels almost invariably focused on a theme that had lent itself to considerable debate and speculation over the past decade in England: the changing nature of conjugality.

Such a change had been wrought by the introduction of the divorce law, which was promulgated to bring the institution of marriage – and more specifically, its dissolution – under a civil rather than ecclesiastical purview. Its modernizing gestures notwithstanding, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 effected a double standard wherein women could apply for divorce only on grounds of the husband's aggravated adultery, that is adultery that was compounded by either bigamy, incest, gross cruelty, or desertion whereas, in what critics refer to as the "double standard," men continued to have the right to apply for divorce based on the wife's adultery alone (Shanley 38). Despite the lop-sided immunities ensured by this double standard, the passing of what became the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 signaled, for many in parliament, "the long-dreaded fall into degraded modernity"

(Chase and Levenson 188). Since adultery (mostly committed by the wife) remained one of the chief grounds for applying for divorce, it now became more firmly a question of the law. And despite the fact that the question of what “constitute[d] satisfactory proof or evidence of adultery” remained intractable (Leckie 89), the public-ness of adultery rendered conjugal infidelity a matter of spectacle in ways that also tacitly normativized a discourse of conjugal fidelity even as its registers remained considerably amorphous.

The impact of the divorce act was perhaps accentuated most by that other momentous event of 1857: the so-called Indian Mutiny. Discussions of the divorce act were already underway in parliament when news of the uprising in India began to trickle in. Questions of fidelity that were being parsed with reference to English couples, especially English wives, now gained an added edge through reference to Indian sepoys in ways that fused patriarchal notions of gender with equally custodial assumptions of race and class. In fact, the furor precipitated by the emphasis on the contractual, rather than sacramental, nature of marriage created the need for more abiding models of conjugality than one that was only ensured by fidelity to the marriage vow. If fidelity or faithfulness is said to be marked more by one’s adherence to a given promise or pledge and loyalty refers to a higher order of fidelity in which one is bound by prior customary obligations that do not hinge on a pledge alone (Allen 288), then such a distinction perhaps explains how even the distant scenario of mutiny, rebellion, and warfare in India nonetheless offered, with its hoary invocations of tribalism and allegiance, a readily available vocabulary for extending the question of loyalty to the state of English matrimony as well. One can even say that the conjunction of the Matrimonial Causes Act and the 1857 rebellion both produced and mediated a crisis of loyalty at complex, overlapping levels, and the events in India not only spectacularized this crisis in gory detail, but they also did so by providing the narrative framework for it. As Karen Chase and Michael Levenson note, “marriage had its elaborate tropology, but divorce erupted into imaginative life without coherent metaphors” (187). It is within this narrative vacuum that the mutinous Indian soldier stood in for, if incongruously, the English wife who had betrayed the sacred code of marriage.<sup>10</sup> But it is also the very imperfections of this proxy – in which gendered similitude (in terms of subordinate status) only served to magnify racial difference – that served a cautionary function in reining in “mutinous” English wives. The Mutiny therefore inaugurated a particular economy of signification in which “India” served as a succinct relay for the breach of and the need for loyalty, raising the pitch of the discourse of loyalty in domains political and domestic, martial as well as marital.

It was very common for newspapers to report on the Mutiny and the proceedings of the divorce act in the same edition, sometimes even on the same page. Such juxtaposition in fact seemed to engender a particular narrative logic for loyalty. As the uprising spread to several Indian provinces, in London the *Morning Chronicle* (5 September 1857) pointed out:

A month ago, the public were cajoled into believing that some five-and-twenty thousand soldiers would be enough to restore peace to India. Now, the partizans of the Government coolly tell us, as if it were a new discovery, that eighty thousand men will be wanted! Nor is this all. Grave doubts are raised as to the permanent loyalty of the Bombay and Madras armies – which is the equivalent of saying that we may want some eighty thousand more! (4)

The searching need for the loyalty of the Bombay and Madras armies – one that could only be ensured by its imminently elusive “permanence” – cascades into an uncertainty that can

only take refuge in excess: “we may want some eighty thousand more.” A similar narrative move – one in which the reiterative need for loyalty is compensated for only through a language of excess – is evident in an accompanying article on the implications of the divorce act (the article appeared on the same page). Discussing the independent rights that would accrue to women over their “self-acquired property” if they successfully claimed desertion by their husbands, the article reports parliament’s inability to stipulate the length of time that would justify claims of desertion. Delineating a specific time period was tricky because, as the *Morning Chronicle* noted, “in these times of emigration and distant enterprise many husbands are accidentally detained from their homes for months and even years, who have no intention of deserting their household duties”(4). Parliament evidently left it to the discretion of the individual magistrate to ascertain the veracity of the claim of desertion. While the article commented that this was but a “vague conclusion,” it conceded that it was “probably the safest at which the Legislature could arrive” (4). But the lingering uncertainty of what would be construed as desertion – an uncertainty that depended as much upon the magistrate’s interpretation of desertion as on the decision of the wife to claim it as such – was evidently a nagging one. As if to quell it, the article anticipates, if in exaggerated optimism, that “in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, in fact, the order will issue as a matter of course leaving the husband or his creditors, to overset the judgment, if they can prove by a distinct process that the charge of desertion is unfounded” (4).

The grotesque consequences of misconstruing desertion were of course starkly brought home by Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s genre-defining sensation novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), in which the husband’s stay in Australia in an effort to amass an adequate means of livelihood for his young family back in England triggers a chain of events, not the least of which is his wife’s bigamous alliance with a wealthy baronet who is much older than she. In fact, while the *Morning Chronicle*’s overstated optimism about the procedure to be followed in arbitrating cases of desertion seeks to offset an uncertainty regarding the wife’s imputed (dis)loyalty, the article’s interest in allowing the husband due opportunity to disprove claims of desertion and thereby save the marriage was not entirely misplaced and reflected some of the realities of colonial exigency and enterprise. A few years after the *Morning Chronicle* article (and a few thousand miles away in Calcutta), the Bengali-language weekly, *Somprakash* (18 May 1863) describes an incident in England wherein a young wife was purportedly taken advantage of by a doctor with whom she was acquainted while her husband was stationed in India, noting that India was often perceived by the English as “the land for unhappy love and broken marriages” (387).<sup>11</sup> In other words, if the 1860s witnessed a thoroughgoing engagement with changing protocols of marriage, then colonies such as India necessitated a compulsive logic of conjugal loyalty – one signified by reiteration and excess – that extended beyond the referential ambit of the 1857 uprising alone.

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IF THIS SEEMS A SOMEWHAT expansive detour to undertake by way of initiating a discussion of *Rajmohan’s Wife*, it is necessary nonetheless because it highlights the transactional economy underpinning literary production in both India and England even as each of these constituencies placed different emphases on the formulation and reconfiguration of conjugality. It is important to note here though that mid-nineteenth century India – and in this case, Bengal – also witnessed, and not without controversy, a discernible shift in notions



of conjugality. The demands of a new patriarchy that was emerging from changing caste alignments and class formations placed emphasis on companionate marriage (I. Chatterjee 34), marking a shift away from earlier practices in which marriages were conducted primarily to cement familial and social ties. In this, English education or influence played a ready role in providing ideals of bourgeois conjugality that were grafted upon Indian literary and mythic traditions replete with figures of romantic love and conjugal harmony (Walsh 92). It is in fact ironic to point to the contentious process of matrimonial reform and its ensuing disquiet in England, for even as the English conjugal ideal was the subject of much doubt and scrutiny, many of its characteristics were being touted for their exemplariness in India.<sup>12</sup> But it is precisely by tracing the entwined nature of these patriarchal pressures (both English and Indian), that one can limn a literary imaginary that was marked in its overlapping simultaneity, a characteristic that is not too often ascribed to colonial literary production, or indeed to the episteme of the colonial. If *Rajmohan's Wife* was serialized in the same year in which, according to Jeanne Fahnestock, the publication of bigamy novels apparently peaked in England (56), then it certainly impels a consideration of a transimperial network of production, circulation, and exchange that is non-normative in its bearings. Indeed, familiar as he may have been with nineteenth-century English fiction, and of the sensational kind as well,<sup>13</sup> the fact that Bankim focused on the question of conjugality in his first novelistic output points not only to the checkered but intimate relation between marriage and the novel form, but also to the transimperial singularity of the conjugal question in the mid-century engagement with modernity. It speaks also to the prolific versatility of the literary mode of sensation in marking this multi-sited encounter. In other words, if *Rajmohan's Wife* is an admixture of some of the familiar components of sensation fiction as recognized in its English guise (gothic, melodrama, detection) and elements from Sanskrit literary traditions as well as contemporary Bengali satire, then Bankim's novel underlines how the genre that we term "sensation" characteristically drew upon an assemblage of idioms and tropes of varying provenance as it emerged in multiple sites in response to the fraught mid-century question of conjugality.<sup>14</sup>

As one of the central characters in *Rajmohan's Wife* remarks early in the novel, "Marriage is called a lottery" (10).<sup>15</sup> By adding a random element of chance to the divinely sanctioned institution of marriage (as it was then widely perceived), the statement opens up marital relations to a kind of speculative scrutiny that was not dissimilar from the discussions that it attracted in Bengal in the early 1860s, especially amongst an English-educated native intelligentsia invested in a new conjugality that in emphasizing a "conscious partnership" also encouraged an "impression [at least] of equality in marriage" (Borthwick 150). Admittedly, such a desire did not go unopposed, and it was fulfilled for the most part only amongst small sections of educated families. But the spread of women's education in the latter half of the nineteenth century played a critical role in reorienting the traditional role of the wife to that of a loving helpmeet who, playing a role similar to that of her English counterpart, was expected to provide counsel and maintain a well-ordered domestic sphere.

While Bankim does not provide any direct temporal marker, it is clearly this contemporary setting that provides the backdrop for *Rajmohan's Wife*, and the novel provides hints aplenty of newer modes of representation and dispensation affecting familial and conjugal relations. It opens, for instance, with two female friends, Kanak and Matangini (the eponymous Rajmohan's wife) – aged thirty and eighteen respectively – making their way to the riverside. The scene of women congregating by the riverside was a familiar literary trope

in Bengali verse and drama. In rehearsing this scene, though, the novel distinctly focuses on married women who would be considered “older”; consequently, neither seems to be hemmed in by the authority of older female relatives, a power dynamic that very commonly marked extended family structures. In the case of the eighteen-year old Matangini, we are told that her husband’s paternal aunt – usually a formidable figure – constitutes part of their household, along with Rajmohan’s sister. Both these women are evidently dependent on Rajmohan, who had relocated with his family to Radhaganj, where the novel is set, for purposes of taking up a job with a wealthy relative. Rajmohan’s somewhat-condensed family structure comprising no adult other than his wife, aunt, and a presumably widowed sister as well as his relocation away from his ancestral seat for purposes of employment certainly presents a changing scenario in both familial and economic terms. Rajmohan’s employer in Radhaganj, however, is a wealthy landowner, and, in what is important for the novel, it is Matangini who had secured his position with the landowner, Madhav, who also happened to be Matangini’s sister’s husband. Although the novel does not explicitly mention it, Matangini’s instrumentality in ensuring the livelihood for the family perhaps also plays a role in granting her a certain immunity at least from her resident in-laws, who, contrary to customary relations, exercise no discernible authority over her. In fact, the female relatives play a very negligible role in the novel, and Matangini’s familial interactions are solely with her husband. Such a narrative framing enables the novel to present a different domestic configuration in which it is the conjugal couple that takes center-stage rather than being absorbed by a more diffuse familial network.

With this representation of a new conjugal structure, however, we are also made aware of a newer and perhaps more insidious incarnation of patriarchal authority that is now constellated most visibly in the sole figure of the husband. Despite – or perhaps because of – his wife’s role in getting him a job, Rajmohan is resentful, churlish, and even physically violent towards Matangini. The fact that theirs is not a happy marriage is hinted at from the beginning of the novel. The narrator extols Matangini’s physical beauty but with the following qualification: “Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion” (3). Relations between Matangini and Rajmohan worsen when Matangini overhears a conversation between her husband and two other men who had evidently been hired to stage a burglary at the house of Madhav (Matangini’s brother-in-law and Rajmohan’s employer). As it evolves through the conversation, the mercenaries intend to decamp not only with Madhav’s valuables but also with the will that provided for the inheritance of the estates he now owned. The discovery of her husband’s involvement in the crime comes as a shock for Matangini, whose first response is to faint. After this melodramatic turn, however, she regains consciousness and, with surprising clarity, proceeds to extricate the person of Rajmohan from the figure of Rajmohan the husband: “She had hitherto known him as a man of mad heart and brutal temper, but she recoiled with horror at the recollection that the accomplice of robbers . . . had hitherto enjoyed her innocent bosom” (36). Acutely aware of the realities of her marital situation but apparently helpless to remedy it, she can now foresee only a bleak future: “Was it in her power, now that her eyes were opened, to tear herself from his disgusting embraces? No, no, she was forever cursed!” (36). In other words, although Matangini begins to view Rajmohan (negatively) in terms more than – or other than – a husband, her future is circumscribed by the immutability of her position as his wife. She toys with the idea of enlisting her friend Kanak’s help to forestall the burglary planned for that very night, but she almost immediately abandons the notion because “it would be necessary to reveal everything



and implicate her husband, but Matangini could not for all the world turn informer against the man to whom she had pledged her faith before God and man" (37).

It is not only Matangini's acknowledgement of her vow but also her decision not to betray Rajmohan that very directly evokes the older, conventional language of the devoted wife, the *patibrata*, for whom her husband "was her god; her devotion to him was to be absolute, contingent on neither his character nor his behavior" (Walsh 54). The language of loyalty – insinuated by the Mutiny for purposes of perpetuating the conjugal unit in England – is implied here through references to the traditional figure of the *patibrata*. However, just as the transposition of the adulterous English wife and the rebellious Indian sepoy was a fraught one and operated more through a reckoning of its limits, the figure of the *patibrata*, at least in *Rajmohan's Wife*, cannot be recuperated with ease. Even as the well-established language of wifely devotion reins in the wayward implications of the particular scene quoted above and stabilizes Matangini's own distraught condition at this point, it seems profoundly unsatisfactory overall. Given Matangini's discerning vision of Rajmohan as husband and man, an analysis that the narrator does nothing to distance the reader from, the narrative makes the non-discernment entailed of the *patibrata* appear asymmetrical. Or, if the *patibrata's* loyalty was to shine through precisely at such moments of crisis when husbandly shortcomings were painfully evident, then the novel offers a decidedly mixed response to such a trial of faith.

In what is a daring decision, Matangini ventures out to personally warn her sister's family of the impending danger. Significantly, when she arrives at her sister's house after a remarkable journey beset with possible mishaps at every stage, the novel focuses more on an extended conversation between Matangini and her brother-in-law Madhav, rather than on one between the two sisters. Such a choice is instrumental though, for it is over the course of this conversation that we become aware of Matangini and Madhav's mutual love for each other. Apparently they had fallen in love in childhood, and while the novel is not very clear about why they did not marry (the inadmissibility of romantic love in marriage negotiations among "respectable" classes can perhaps be surmised), it is evident that both of them had kept their feelings in check. However, on the night of the intended robbery, one that Madhav is able to successfully avert due to Matangini's ample warning, the emotional resolve falters if but momentarily. For the only time in the novel, we get a sense of a compatible union and also witness Matangini portrayed as "standing calm and serene, her usually melancholy features beaming with the light of an unutterable feeling" (54).

Quite remarkably, when Matangini expresses her love for Madhav, only to then recriminate herself for the transgression, it is Madhav whom she refers to as her moral compass: "Yes, reproach me Madhav . . . censure me, teach me, for I have been sinful: sinful in the eyes of my God, and I must say it, Madhav, of my God in earth, of yourself" (55). Stilted and artificial as the prose appears in this exchange,<sup>16</sup> it is perhaps only through this strained idiom that the narrative can sustain Matangini's rather radical anointing of Madhav as her "God in earth," a designation normally reserved for the figure of the husband. If this brief moment allows – despite its transgressiveness – for the only glimpse of a new conjugality in the novel, the refreshing possibilities of such a union are soon hemmed in by Matangini lapsing into her role as Rajmohan's wife. Although she discloses the details of the robbery plot to Madhav, she steadfastly refrains from divulging Rajmohan's implication in it. And when Madhav, impassioned by the exchange, implores her nonetheless to forget him, Matangini, "in the splendor of new flushed beauty" replies, "if the human mind can be

taught to forget, I will forget you. We part now and for ever” (55–56). The emphasis here on Matangini’s changed countenance is notable, for it registers the ways in which it is the body rather than the spoken word that proves the more adequate conduit for expressing the new and imminently compatible conjugality. Moments such as this not only evidence how the genre of sensation operates through purportedly affecting the bodily senses, but they also underscore how the female body emerged as the locus for articulating the “newness” of the modern.<sup>17</sup>

Matangini’s reinstatement as Rajmohan’s wife is perhaps inevitable. But her “new flushed beauty,” suggestive of the fulfillment that the meeting with Madhav provides, makes the terms of her wifely allegiance to Rajmohan, as she had stated them earlier, seem even more perfunctory. In fact, we also get very little of the language of the *patibrata* after the meeting with Madhav. What we get instead is a strong sense of duty, morality, and purity (57) that paves her return to Rajmohan. In fact the novel frames Matangini’s return more along recognizable lines of bourgeois self-fashioning and control, and it is interesting that the ensuing loyalty has very little to do with the person of Rajmohan. In Allen’s schema mentioned earlier, Matangini’s determined (and detached) adherence to her marriage vow would qualify as fidelity rather than loyalty. And even if one does not fully subscribe to such a differentiating schema, Matangini’s subsequent relation with Rajmohan does question the feasibility of a marriage based on the kind of loyalty demonstrated by Matangini, even as the novel as a whole falters in its attempts to locate a suitable idiom of conjugal loyalty.

Rajmohan for his part had evidently suspected Matangini’s feelings for Madhav all along, and when he confronts Matangini with full knowledge of her “sin” upon her return, openly accusing her of being a “harlot,” she replies with a quiet confidence:

You are right . . . I love him – deeply do I love him; long loved I and love him so. I will also tell you that words have I uttered which, but for the uncontrolled – uncontrollable madness of a love you cannot understand, would never have passed these lips. But beyond this I have not been guilty to you. Do you believe me? (61)

Rajmohan apparently does not believe her, for he soon tries to kill Matangini. And though Matangini survives the attempt and does indeed scrupulously avoid any opportunity to meet Madhav thereafter, she becomes inaccommodable in the narrative and is eventually sent away from Radhaganj to her father’s house, where she meets an early death.

Even as the narrative can scarcely accommodate Matangini, it furthers a marked ambivalence toward her. She is not celebrated, but she is far from serving as a cautionary tale. In her defiance and transgressiveness she cuts a larger than life figure, providing the first of strong-minded, rebellious women that Bankim was to create. It is through this imaginative excess that the novel also posits a model of conjugality that finds current ones lacking. The underlying tone of the meeting between Madhav and Matangini idealizes the notion of companionability thus rendering it desirable (perhaps even more so through its transgressiveness). But the idea of a companionate marriage also apparently calls for an idiom of conjugal loyalty; in fact, the need for such an idiom is further emphasized through a sub-plot involving Madhav’s bigamous cousin.<sup>18</sup> However, even as the sub-plot makes an interesting play with established stereotypes inhabiting contemporary Bengali satire, it makes evident the novel’s larger inability to supply an adequate idiom of conjugal loyalty. On the one hand, the non-discerning devotion of the *patibrata* – which seemed to bolster earlier iterations of loyalty in the novel – makes the person of the husband appear irrelevant in ways that seem antithetical to the idea of a companionate marriage. On the other hand, Matangini’s ensuing loyalty – one borne of self-possession and having more to do with the

institution of marriage than with Rajmohan as a person – has somewhat the same effect. Ironically, the two could even be said to be two sides of the same coin were it not for the fact that when pushed to its extreme, the latter produces perplexing situations, such as the one in which Matangini, unanchored by any affective attachment for Rajmohan, even confesses her love for Madhav to Rajmohan while also stating: “beyond this I have not been guilty to you.” As the narrator had summed up earlier, Matangini was but a “half guilty and half innocent woman” (60). And it is perhaps this suspended state of guilt and innocence that the novel cannot ultimately accommodate, just as it fails in providing an adequate idiom of conjugal loyalty that at once harbors and exceeds the demands of a companionate marriage.

But then one wonders about the possibility at all of such adequacy. Not only does loyalty seem to be authenticated by an affective component (which Matangini does not bear towards Rajmohan) as well as the legitimacy of its object (Matangini’s loyalty towards Madhav does not of course count), but as George Fletcher notes in a broader context, loyalty is marked by “fidelity of the heart, steadfastness of mind, constancy of character.” Yet “in a practical world,” Fletcher points out, “the inner side of morality gives way to the external exigencies of proof.” As he avers, “clothed in the crimes of treason and adultery, the figure of disloyalty enters, where morality generally fears to tread” (47). Loyalty, in Fletcher’s reckoning, names itself through its obverse. Or, as we have noted in the *Morning Chronicle*’s reporting of potentially mutinous Indian sepoy and disloyal English wives, it seems to gratify itself through the demand for excess that also instantiates it.

It is not surprising, then, that on the one hand we have a proliferation, from the late 1860s onwards in Bengal, of advice manuals written for and even by women that extol the very virtues of the figure of the *pativrata* whom *Rajmohan’s Wife* otherwise accords a somewhat ambivalent response to. The renewed emphasis on the figure of the *pativrata* should not be read as a stubborn remnant of past practices as much as a recombinant response to newer modes of conjugality.<sup>19</sup> In this context, it also seems feasible to ask if the profusion of Mutiny narratives in England too perhaps played a similarly supplemental role in addressing the elusive question of conjugal loyalty. On the other hand, we also witness a broader literary (and literal) preoccupation with the possibilities of adultery and bigamy – purported signifiers of the deficit of loyalty – as in *Rajmohan’s Wife* and indeed in English sensation fiction, which are relayed through the narrative excesses that sensation so tellingly affords.<sup>20</sup> Evidently, the demand for loyalty was a compulsive one, not least because of the shifting or eroding modes of feudal and patriarchal authority that was to brush up against varying notions of personhood from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>21</sup> And the obsession with the changing modes of the conjugal in both England and India was perhaps symptomatic of this compulsiveness, even as both these constituencies mediated overlapping questions of imperial loyalty in ways that rendered the conjugal itself a metaphor.

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

## NOTES

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Group at the University of Houston (2012), as well as to audience members at NAVSA and INCS conferences for their helpful questions.

1. Since Bankim is always referred to by his first name, I follow that custom.
2. Ironically, both these essays were written in English. For a revisionary assessment of the value of Bengali literature of the early nineteenth century, see Harder. For an account of the gaps and disjunctures between *bhadralok* writing and popular Bengali literary production, see Banerjee.
3. One of Bankim's biographers writes that *Rajmohan's Wife* "was not able to excite even [Bankim's] enthusiastic friends" (Das 21).
4. See Chatterjee (1994).
5. *Nakshas* constituted depictions of contemporary urban life that were often satirical. That the word is derived from the Persian *naqshah* points to the irreducibly heterogeneous attribute of what we view as "indigenous." For an illuminating discussion of the development of the novel in Bengali as well as other Indian languages, see Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*.
6. While this appellation is not an uncontested one, in his preface to *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, Peary Chand Mitra, adopting the nom de plume of Tekchand Thakur, draws attention to the fact that his work, an "original Novel in Bengali" was "the first work of its kind" (n.pag).
7. In keeping with current critical interest in the efficacy of oceanic paradigms (Blum), I invoke the figuration of a confluence in order to take advantage of the metaphoric fluidity that non-terrestrial metaphors proffer. Doing so enables me to contain the possibility of reducing the analytic of encounter to frames that are either largely salutary or wholly antagonistic. For a critical and imaginative engagement with the idea of confluence as a concept-metaphor, see Trojanow and Hoskoté.
8. In referring to "Victorian" or "Victorianism," it is worth recalling Morse Peckham's observation from nearly fifty years ago that "'Victorianism' is merely an historical-cultural construct or model. . . . At best its value is heuristic" (277). It seems apropos to revisit this observation in light of an ongoing recognition of the need to resituate "Victorian" in a globalized setting (Gagnier) or disentangle it from an overtly British association (Pykett 16). For an example of what such an effort might look like, see Baghchi.
9. Brantlinger points to the 1860s as the decade in which sensation novels "flourished . . . only to die out a decade or two later" (1). Recent scholarship, however, accords a longer timeline to the popularity of the genre; see Barton, Huston, and Phegley. What is clear, though, is that the 1860s witnessed a remarkable proliferation in the production of sensation literature.
10. For readings that highlight this transposition see Chase and Levenson 194; Nayder 262–63; and Trompe.
11. All translations from the *Somprakash* are mine.
12. It is important to keep in mind that bourgeois conjugality was very much of a learned notion and experience in nineteenth-century England too, and, as Helena Michie points out, not without its missteps as well (Michie passim). Whereas Michie uses the term conjugality to refer more to the "element of sexuality" in marriage (20), my discussion of newer models of conjugality in Bankim's text, and in mid-nineteenth century Bengal, refers more to the notion of companionate marriage.
13. Bankim was, for instance, an admirer of G. W. M. Reynolds, considered to be a literary predecessor of the sensation novelists of the 1860s. Also, in the preface to his novel *Rajani* (1877), Bankim stated that the narrative style of *Rajani* was inspired by Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (qtd. in Bagal 1: 37; translation mine). Incidentally, Mary Elizabeth Braddon had dedicated *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) to Bulwer-Lytton.
14. The editors of the volume *Transatlantic Sensations* comment on how the genre of sensation cross-pollinated over the long nineteenth century through transatlantic exchanges (Barton, Huston, and Phegley 13). It would be worthwhile to explore further how the transimperial context adds to this cross-pollination. Bankim, for instance, would have been influenced not only by narratives of the supernatural as distilled through European modes of the gothic but also by his early exposure to ideas of mysticism (Das 5). His depictions of romantic love drew from a rich tradition of Sanskrit poetry,

- and though *Rajmohan's Wife* does not incorporate satire, its broad distinctions between the educated, city-bred Bengali male and his less-educated kinsman in the village are reminiscent of the typologies made popular by contemporary Bengali satire.
15. All references to the novel are to the edition edited by Mukherjee and are parenthetically cited.
  16. Joshi makes this point in her reading of the novel (151).
  17. As Youngkin points out in her reading of English sensation fiction, “the sensation fiction heroine’s body is central to her ability to effect change” (580).
  18. To put it briefly, the sub-plot involves Madhav’s cousin, Mathur. Whereas the urban-educated Madhav is projected as the exemplary male figure in the novel, the country-bred uneducated Mathur plays the villainous role and is the mastermind behind the plot to steal Madhav’s will and other valuables. The unsavoriness of Mathur’s character seems to be underlined by the unwieldy state of his bigamous household as well as the predatory advances he makes towards Matangini. The sympathetic light in which Mathur’s first wife, Tara, is portrayed provides an implicit critique of Mathur’s bigamous and adulterous ways.
  19. The caution against reading the emphasis on wifely devotion as a vestigial remnant of traditional practice is inspired by Chakrabarty (83). For Chakrabarty, the particular formation of the Bengali modern in the nineteenth century serves as one example of the plurality of the modern. My objective, however, has been to use the lens of loyalty to underline the punctuated history of the notion of the modern itself, as it was shared and transmitted across the imperial terrain.
  20. While Bankim was to return to the question of bigamy in his novel *Bishabriksha (The Poison Tree)* in 1873, two events in 1870s Calcutta created major scandals. Centering on issue of adultery, both these events became the topic of public discussion and inspired a spate of plays. For a sensitive appraisal of the larger ramifications of these scandals, see Sarkar, “Talking about Scandals.”
  21. In a related vein, Loesberg makes a valuable argument linking the formal features of English sensation fiction to the ambivalences generated by ongoing class-based reform legislation (133). For a sedimented reading of the different trajectories that the project of selfhood both emanated from and embarked upon in nineteenth-century Bengal, see Sarkar, “A Book of Her Own, A Life of Her Own.”

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